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ABSTRACT

In this three-part lesson, students examine structure and characterization in the short story and consider the significance of humor through a study of Mark Twain's "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County." In Part I, through skits and storytelling, students first examine the structure of Twain's story and the role he creates for his tall-tale storyteller, Simon Wheeler. They then investigate Twain's use of dialect by continuing a story that Wheeler starts to tell, imitating his comic style. In Part II, students compare Twain's story with one of the Sut Lovingood stories by George Washington Harris, again examining the story's structure by performing it as a skit. After considering how this structure "frames" the trickster Sut Lovingood, as compared to the frame Twain creates for his trickster, Jim Smiley, students produce a character sketch of Harris' comic protagonist and a sample of his humorous dialect. Finally, in Part III, students read a humorous story by Nathaniel Hawthorne in order to gain perspective on Twain's brand of humor and its significance within the context of American literary tradition. After debating the merits of "moral" humor like Hawthorne's as compared with the "folk" humor of Harris and Twain, students test the possibilities of blending these traditions by recasting a paragraph of Hawthorne's story in dialect style. The lesson plan also contains the subject areas covered in the lesson, time required to complete the lesson, the skills used in the lesson, the grade level (9-12), and lists of the standards developed by professional or government associations that are related to the lesson, as well as activities to extend the lesson. (RS)

Mark Twain and American Humor [Lesson Plan].

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SUBJECT CATALOGUE

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LESSON PLANS

REFERENCE SHELF

TEACHERS' LOUNGE

ABOUT EDSITEMENT



Mark Twain and American Humor

Introduction

In this three-part lesson, students examine structure and characterization in the short story and consider the significance of humor through a study of Mark Twain's "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County." In Part I, through skits and storytelling, students first examine the structure of Twain's story and the role he creates for his tall-tale storyteller, Simon Wheeler. They then investigate Twain's use of dialect by continuing a story that Wheeler starts to tell, imitating his comic style. In Part II, students compare Twain's story with one of the Sut Lovingood stories by George Washington Harris, again examining the story's structure by performing it as a skit. After considering how this structure "frames" the trickster Sut Lovingood, as compared to the frame Twain creates for his trickster, Jim Smiley, students produce a character sketch of Harris' comic protagonist and a sample of his humorous dialect. Finally, in Part III, students read a humorous story by Nathaniel Hawthorne in order to gain perspective on Twain's brand of humor and its significance within the context of American literary tradition. After debating the merits of "moral" humor like Hawthorne's as compared with the "folk" humor of Harris and Twain, students test the possibilities of blending these traditions by recasting a paragraph of Hawthorne's story in dialect style.

Learning Objectives

To analyze the use of literary conventions and devices to develop character and point of view in the short story; to investigate the purposes and significance of literary humor; to examine Mark Twain's storytelling style in relation to that of other American humorists.

Lesson Plan

PART I: A New Kind of Humor

1 When Mark Twain's "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" first appeared in 1865, it was hailed by James Russell Lowell, the Boston-based leader of the literary elite, as "the finest piece of humorous literature yet produced in

[SUBJECT AREA >](#)

[Literature: American](#)

[Literature: Fiction](#)

[Art: Folklore](#)

[History: U.S.: The West](#)

[GRADE LEVEL >](#)

9-12

[TIME REQUIRED >](#)

The full lesson plan requires three class periods, although the individual parts of the lesson can be presented as free-standing single class period units.

[SKILLS >](#)

reading literary texts

critical analysis

literary interpretation

historical interpretation

drawing inferences and comparisons

creative writing

Internet skills

[STANDARD ALIGNMENT >](#)

[NCTE/IRA List of Standards for the English Language Arts](#)

1. Students read a wide range of print and nonprint texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; ([more](#))
2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g.,

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America." This was high praise for a tall-tale from a hitherto little known San Francisco newspaper humorist, but Lowell aimed precisely at the most distinguishing feature of Twain's first nationally acclaimed work of fiction, its transforming relationship to the long tradition of American humor. In this brief masterpiece Twain combines the vibrant, loquacious storytelling tradition rooted in folk tale, fable, and gossip with the more calculated literary tradition of satire, irony, and wit. This lesson plan frames "The Jumping Frog" in this context, introducing students to both aspects of American humor in order to deepen appreciation of Twain's achievement.

2 Begin by introducing students to Mark Twain's formative years as a Western journalist, a stage in his career that can come as a surprise to those who "place" him as a Mississippi River writer. For background, visit the [People in THE WEST](#) section of the [New Perspectives on THE WEST](#) website on EDSITement; click on [Show Contents](#) in the navigation bar at the foot of the page and select [Clemens](#) in the navigational sidebar for a short profile highlighting Twain's (i.e., Samuel Clemens) experiences out West. Also visit the [Mark Twain in His Times](#) website, which includes samples and reviews of his early days as a humorous lecturer in California. Select [Mark Twain on Stage](#) at the website's homepage, then click on [MT Live -- Lectures & Readings](#) and select [Our Fellow Savages](#) for the text of Twain's first lecture, an account of his visit to the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii), which he first performed in 1866. Or click [Reviews and Recollections](#) on the [Mark Twain on Stage](#) page for 19th-century comment on Twain's talents as what we might call a stand-up comedian today.

3 Have students read "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County." An [electronic text](#) of the story is available in the [Huck Finn](#) section of [Mark Twain in His Times](#). (Click [Huck Finn](#) on the website's homepage, then select [Sources & Pre-Texts](#) and click on the picture of the [jumping frog](#) to retrieve the text.)

- Focus initially on the story's structure by having a small group of students perform it as a skit. They will find that Twain has devised a story-within-a-story framing structure by making his narrator the reluctant audience for his storyteller, Simon Wheeler, and by distinguishing his storyteller from his protagonist, Jim Smiley.
- After students have performed the story, discuss how its structure contributes to the comic effect. How does this structure influence our perception of Jim Smiley? To what extent does he seem just a character in a story? To what extent does he seem realistic, a picturesque inhabitant of the Old West? To what extent does he seem a fantasy creation of the storyteller, Simon Wheeler? How do these perspectives combine in our response to Smiley as a comic protagonist?
- Go on to discuss the storyteller's contribution to the story's comic effect. How does Simon Wheeler's voice influence our perception of Smiley? To what extent does Wheeler's picturesque speaking style help bring Smiley's story to life?

philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience. ([more](#))

3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. ([more](#))
4. Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes. ([more](#))
5. Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes. ([more](#))
6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and nonprint texts. ([more](#))
7. Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. ([more](#))
8. Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge. ([more](#))
9. Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles. ([more](#))
11. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities. ([more](#))

National Council for the Social Studies

1. Culture ([more](#))

National Standards for Arts Education

Theatre

1. Script writing through improvising, writing, and refining scripts based on

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To what extent does his distinctive style bring Wheeler himself to life as a comic character?

4 Humorists generally have a target; they make jokes at someone's expense. Ask students: Who is the target in the "Jumping Frog" story?

- They will no doubt easily see that Jim Smiley is the primary target. He is a trickster who turns out to be too clever for his own good. Ask students for examples from fable and folklore of similar characters (e.g., Anansi the spider in African folktales, Coyote in Navajo folktales, the hare in Aesop's fable of the tortoise and the hare). Are similar characters still getting laughs in our humor today? Ask students for examples from recent television sitcoms and movies.
- In addition to Smiley, the narrator is also a target in Twain's story, a victim of the anonymous trickster who sent him to the garrulous Simon Wheeler. In fact, the narrator's eagerness to escape Wheeler at the end of the story suggests that he may be Wheeler's victim as well. Ask students for evidence from the story that Wheeler's tale of the jumping frog is a deliberate fiction, a "whopper" told with a straight face to "sucker in" a credulous listener.
- Help students recognize that the story's structure enables Twain's humor to puncture the pretensions of two comic victims at the same time, both the fast-talking Jim Smiley and the literate narrator. Ask: What are some similarities between Smiley and the narrator? How do they reflect on one another and on their different social circumstances -- the narrator a representative of "civilization" and Smiley a representative of the "frontier"?

5 Have students experiment with Twain's storytelling technique by taking up the tale where Simon Wheeler left it, with the story of Jim Smiley's "yaller one-eyed cow that didn't have no tail, only jest a short stump like a bannanner." Have students work in small groups to brainstorm story ideas about this memorable animal and its trickster owner. Then have each student write a story about Jim Smiley and his cow, imitating the dialect style of Simon Wheeler. When they have completed their stories, have students read them aloud, then discuss the experience of writing in dialect.

- Is dialect a help or a hindrance? What resources does it make available for scene setting and characterization? Does it enlarge or restrict one's vocabulary?
- How does dialect influence plot development and narration? Does it limit one to the "and then, and then" connection of incident to incident typical of oral storytelling? Does it open opportunities for sliding easily off on a tangent?
- Have students comment on Twain's use of dialect, based on their own experience with this literary device. What goes into the dialect he creates -- misspellings? grammatical mistakes? inventive punctuation? loose sentence structure? colloquial turns of phrase? Have students point out examples of each of these stylistic tricks and describe the tricks they used to create a dialect effect.

personal experience and heritage, imagination, literature, and history ([more](#))

2. Acting by developing, communicating, and sustaining characters in improvisations and informal or formal productions ([more](#))

Visual Arts

4. Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and cultures ([more](#))
6. Making connections between visual arts and other disciplines ([more](#))

View your state's standards

PART II: Regional Traditions

1 The group of writers known as Southwest Humorists were an important influence on Mark Twain. These were educated storytellers who specialized in tall-tales from the backwoods of Arkansas, Tennessee, western Georgia -- the area known as the Old Southwest. For background on these writers, visit the student exhibit, [Mark Twain & Southwestern Humor](#) at the [Mark Twain in His Times](#) website. (On the website's homepage, click [About This Site](#), then select [Student Projects](#) for a link to [Mark Twain & Southwestern Humor](#).) To introduce your students to this tradition of American humor, have them read one of the Sut Lovingood stories by George Washington Harris. An electronic text of "[Mrs. Yardley's Quilting Party](#)," the most frequently anthologized Sut Lovingood yarn, is available at the [Mark Twain & Southwestern Humor](#) exhibit at the [Mark Twain in His Times](#) website.

2 Students will likely find the dialect of Sut Lovingood difficult, and in places baffling. To address this difficulty, have students read parts of the story aloud, exaggerating the drawl and twang conveyed by Harris' spelling. Then ask students to compare this use of dialect with that found in Twain's "Jumping Frog" story.

- How does each dialect style (Twain's and Harris') characterize the speaker? How does each influence our attitude toward the speaker? Is Sut Lovingood more or less appealing for the way he speaks?
- Have students rewrite a passage of the Sut Lovingood story first in modern English, then in the dialect style of Mark Twain. What is gained and lost by each transformation?

3 Focus next on the structure of Harris' story. Again, students might dramatize the structure by enacting the story as a skit. They will notice that Harris, too, frames his story by making it a tale told to his narrator, yet the storyteller in this case is the protagonist of the tale as well.

- How does this structure influence our perception of Sut Lovingood? How does it position him in relation to the narrator and the literate, "civilized" world that the narrator represents? How does it reflect on the "folk" world for which Sut is the spokesman?
- Based on the story's structure, who is the target of Harris' humor? To what extent is Sut Lovingood the instrument of Harris' ridicule and to what extent the object of it? Is Sut a trickster like Jim Smiley or, as Harris described him in the subtitle to his collection of Sut Lovingood stories, "a Nat'ral Born Durn'd Fool"?

4 Critics generally agree that the most lasting achievement of the Sut Lovingood stories is the characterization of Sut Lovingood himself. His vitality and spirit have been praised by Mark Twain and William Faulkner alike. Have students share in this enjoyment of an American original by writing character sketches of Sut Lovingood, describing his appearance and personality, and giving a sample of his distinctive speech. As inspiration, share with students the original [illustrations](#) of Sut Lovingood available at the [Documenting the American South](#) website. (On the website's homepage, click [Library of Southern Literature, Beginning to 1920](#), then select [Index of Authors](#) and scroll down to "Harris, George Washington" for an [electronic text](#) of the collected Sut Lovingood stories with [illustrations](#).)

PART III: Literary Humor

1 Finally, introduce students to the more "literary" tradition of American humor by having them read "Dr. Heidegger's Experiment," by Nathaniel Hawthorne, available in the electronic text of *Twice-Told Tales* at the **Nathaniel Hawthorne** website. (On the website's homepage, select *Twice-Told Tales* and scroll down the table of contents to "Dr. Heidegger's Experiment.") As students will notice at once, dialect and local color play no part in the humor of this story. The story's structure, too, is far removed from the traditions of oral transmission that underlie the structures developed by Twain and Harris.

- Have students attempt to present Hawthorne's story as a skit. Is there a role for Hawthorne's narrator in their dramatization of the story? Where does the narrator stand in relation to the action he describes? Is he the storyteller, like Simon Wheeler? an audience, like the narrators created by Twain and Harris? simply an observer of the action, like Hawthorne's reader? Have students cite evidence from the story to support their opinions.
- Have students consider Dr. Heidegger's role in the structure of the story. To what extent can he be compared to a storyteller like Simon Wheeler? To what extent can he be compared to a trickster like Jim Smiley or Sut Lovingood? To what extent is Dr. Heidegger a satirist who "stages" this experiment to reveal his victims' weaknesses?
- How does the story's structure influence our perception of Hawthorne's characters? Do they seem "storybook" characters? realistic? fanciful? Have students cite passages from the text to illustrate how the narrator's choice of words in describing his characters, and his choice of props and costumes for the scene, influence our perception of them.

2 Though a more refined humorist than Harris and Twain, Hawthorne is also targeting an element or aspect of American society for ridicule. But who is Hawthorne's target?

- Is the story told at the expense of old people, like those whom Dr. Heidegger invites to taste the waters of the fountain of youth? To what extent does Hawthorne's use of allegorical elements, like the fountain of youth, bring a broader target into view? What does Dr. Heidegger's experiment reveal about "people in general"?
- What is the "moral" of Hawthorne's story? Is there a similar kind of "moral" in this sense to the stories of Harris and Twain? Should there be? Divide the class for a debate on this issue. Have one group argue that moral humor like Hawthorne's is superior to the often amoral humor of the folk tale and gossip tradition. Have the other group argue that Hawthorne's style of humor pales in comparison to that provided by humorists like Harris and Twain.

3 Conclude this lesson by asking students to translate a passage from Hawthorne's story into dialect. Have them look, for example, at the paragraph beginning, "The fair widow knew, of old, that Colonel Killigrew's compliments were not always measured by sober truth..." Ask them to imagine how Simon Wheeler or Sut Lovingood might portray the scene Hawthorne's narrator describes. In the process of recasting Hawthorne's prose, they will likely discover that he is a more artful stylist than they

might at first suppose, and discover too, as Mark Twain discovered, that an equal measure of art is required to achieve such effects in the easy-going accents of a storyteller.

Extending the Lesson

Students interested in learning more about the humor of the Old Southwest will find a rich repository of texts in the Library of Southern Literature, Beginning to 1920 collection at the **Documenting the American South** website. Encourage them to sample A. B. Longstreet's Georgia Scenes and T. B. Thorpe's The Hive of "The Bee-Hunter." For a different perspective on American dialect humor, students might visit the **American Verse Project** website to sample the poems of Robert W. Service, such as "The Cremation of Sam McGee" in Spell of the Yukon. (Click on Browse the American Verse Project Texts on the website's homepage and scroll down the index of authors to the entries for Robert W. Service.)